MUNICIPAL SERVICES IN THE COUNTY OF STRATHCONA NO. 20

SUMMARY REPORT

Alberta Municipal Affairs
Urban Advisory Group and
Special Projects Branch

July 1983

NOTE:

This is one of three volumes which comprise the entire Report on Municipal Services in the County of Strathcona No. 20.

Companion volumes to this one include:

- The Main Report
- The Appendices

A limited number of copies of the entire report are available from:

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OF STRATHCONA NO. 20

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MUNICIPAL SERVICES IN THE COUNTY OF STRATHCONA NO. 20

SUMMARY REPORT

PART I - INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF MAIN FINDINGS

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The Report of Municipal Services in the County of Strathcona No. 20 has been prepared by Alberta Municipal Affairs at the request of the Strathcona County Council.

The information contained in the report is intended to provide the county council and administration with an evaluation of the municipal services which the county provides. There are two main objectives of the report:

- To compare the level and financing of municipal services in Strathcona County with that in other selected Alberta municipalities.
- To determine, as far as is possible, the benefits and costs of each municipal service to the rural and urban (Sherwood Park) components of the county.

The report has been prompted, in part, by the effects upon the county of the 1 January 1982 annexation decision and the general economic slowdown. The annexation has resulted in a loss to the county of about seven per cent of its population, 13 per cent of its area and 20 per cent of its tax revenue base. The economic slowdown has resulted in a general program of expenditure restraint and a reduction in expectations of future growth.

The report is expected to assist the county in identifying appropriate courses of action in regard to the level (or standard) of municipal services provided to its urban and rural residents, and in regard to the equitable financing of these services.[1]

2. METHOD OF THE REPORT

The municipal services in Strathcona County are analysed in detail and the findings are compared to other Albera municipalities. Since Strathcona contains an urban component (Sherwood Park) and a rural component, several urban and rural municipalities have been selected for the comparative base.

The major comparisons are made for Sherwood Park to the four cities (4C) of Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, St. Albert and Red Deer. Five rural municipalities (5RM) - counties of Leduc and Parkland and the municipal districts (MDs) of Foothills, Rockyview and Sturgeon - are used for rural area comparisons. For some services additional urban comparisons are made with Airdrie, Fort Saskatchewan, Leduc and Spruce Grove.

The individual services in Strathcona are rated on the basis of their comparative level and cost and on the basis of public satisfaction.[2] From the cost and level ratings, a measure is derived of cost-efficiency, that is, value for money spent. From the cost and satisfaction ratings, a measure is derived of cost-effectiveness, that is, meeting the needs and wants of residents.

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1 See Appendix I of the Appendices volume for the Terms of Reference for the report.

2 The satisfaction ratings are derived primarily from the material compiled by Dr. T.L. Burton of the University of Alberta based upon a 1979 public opinion poll conducted in Strathcona County. See Appendix III of this report. Ratings are made for Sherwood Park, for the rural areas and for the entire county.

Most services are compared on the basis of 1981 data for the selected comparison municipalities, and 1981 and 1982 data for Strathcona County. The main source of the data is the annual financial statements submitted by all municipalities to Alberta Municipal Affairs. For Strathcona, this source is supplemented by budget and trial balance data and by other information supplied by the county administration.

The individual municipal service analyses take up the major portion of the Main Report (pages 42 to 327). Other information presented for Strathcona includes: population growth, density and distribution; property assessment levels and type; levels of property taxation and long-term capital debt; municipal staffing and contracted services; and trends in municipal expenditures and revenues since 1976.[1]

An overall analysis of municipal services in the County of Strathcona is presented at the end of the Main Report (pages 346 to 398). Consideration is given to such matters as: recent trends in service expenditures; the range of services and how they are provided; overall service cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness; urban/rural distribution of service costs; and an assessment of current local government arrangements in the county.

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1 The Main Report contains over 100 tables of data. Appendix II of the Appendices volume presents 1976 and 1981 data summaries for Strathcona and the comparison municipalities.

3. REVIEW OF MAIN FINDINGS

The County of Strathcona is clearly a highly successful municipal operation. The range and level of services it provides to its residents is considerably better than that in other comparable urban and rural municipalities. Rural residents of the county, in particular, receive much better municipal services than what is normal in rural parts of Alberta.

The integrated urban/rural structure of the county leads to specific economies in service provision enabling Strathcona to provide above average services at only average levels of cost. The substantial non-residential (industrial) tax base of the county (although less than before because of annexation) helps to enable higher than average service levels. Residential tax burdens in the county are in the upper range exhibited by the comparison municipalities but they are certainly not excessive considering the municipal services provided.

In terms of the rural/urban distribution of municipal net expenditures, the rural area accounts for a per capita expenditure some 50 per cent higher than that for urban residents. In the near future, however, it is expected that this net cost divergence will diminish as increased expenditures are required for urban expansion and maintenance and as the rate and cost of rural residential growth slows.

The report identifies some specific matters which warrant attention. These include:

- Rural road maintenance - a rationalization of the rural road network and a promotion of public understanding of the level and cost of the service provided.

- Public transit - improvements in the service provided and an examination of the county operating its own system.

- Ambulance - an improvement in the service level provided primarily through better training for ambulance personnel.

- Garbage Collection - consideration of the implementation of user charges so that those rural residents that do not receive a collection service do not pay for it through taxation.

- Police Protection - an examination of the feasibility of the county establishing its own police force.

- Transportation and Family and Community Service Grants - negotiation with the provincial departments concerned so that the county is not penalized in grant revenues due to its unique rural/urban structure.

The remainder of this Summary Report reviews the basic information presented in the Main Report. For full details and explanations the relevant sections of the Main Report should be consulted.

PART II - STRATHCONA COUNTY OVERVIEW

The County of Strathcona No. 20 is located immediately east of the City of Edmonton. It is bounded to the north by the North Saskatchewan River, to the east by Elk Island National Park and to the south by Township Line 51. (See map in inside back cover of Main Report.)

The county is unlike any other municipality in Alberta. It is organized and classified as a rural municipality but less than 10 per cent of its population lives on farms. It contains Sherwood Park, the eighth largest urban centre in Alberta and the largest unincorporated hamlet to be found almost anywhere. It also contains part of the largest industrial concentration in the province and it has the greatest number of country-residential (acreage) developments of any Alberta municipality.

Strathcona County is the smallest rural municipality in Alberta in terms of area but the largest in terms of population. Both its population and area decreased from 1981 to 1982 due to the annexation decision.

1. POPULATION

The majority, 62 per cent, of the county's population is residents of Sherwood Park (1982 pop. of 29,764). Country-residential residents account for almost 30 per cent, while residents of farms and small hamlets comprise less than 10 per cent. The population loss through annexation caused an increase in the percentage represented by Sherwood Park over that of 1981.

Data Summary 1 (page S-7) indicates that most of the population

DATA SUMMARY 1 - POPULATION DATA

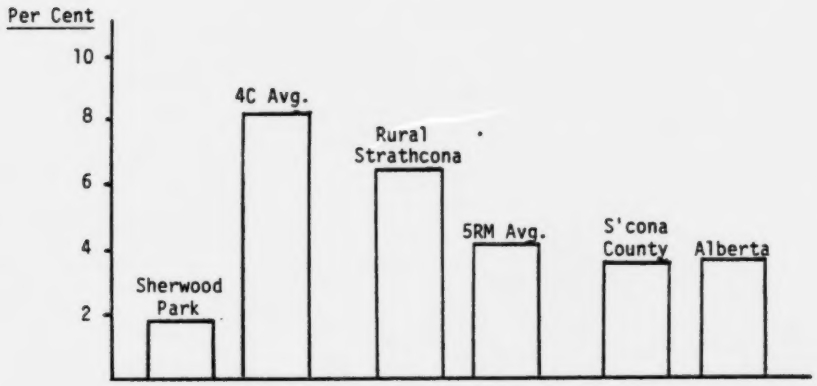
A. STRATHCONA COUNTY

	Total Population	Land Area (hectures)[1]
1976	41,794	145,020
1981	50,079	146,138
1982	47,949	124,485

B. PERCENT OF COUNTY POPULATION

	1976	1981	1982
Sherwood Park	63	58	62
Country-Residential	21	26	29
Farm	10	10	6
Other[2]	6	6	3

C. AVERAGE ANNUAL RATES OF POPULATION GROWTH
1976-1981



D. POPULATION DENSITY 1981

	Persons per Hectare	Persons per km Roads[3]
Rural Strathcona	0.15	13.5
5RM Average	0.05	5.6
Sherwood Park	15.9	230
4C Average	7.3	133

Notes: 1 One hectare is approximately equal to 2.5 acres.
2 includes small hamlets and trailer parks (no trailer parks in 1982).
3 Primary highways excluded. See page 136 and 156 of Main Report.

Source: See Main Report pages 11, 12, 13, 136, 156 and Appendices pages A-7 and A-11.

growth from 1976 to 1981 occured in the rural parts of the county and at a rate noticeably higher than the five comparison rural municipalities (5RM). The country-residential sector accounted for most of that growth. On the other hand, Sherwood Park grew much more slowly and at a rate well below the four comparison cities (4C). Overall, the county growth was almost identical to that for the entire province.

Rural Strathcona has a much higher population density than the 5RM due to the extensive country-residential development. The density for Sherwood Park is higher than the 4C average, but that is due to the absence of corporate boundaries encompassing vacant land rather than to the nature of the urban development.

2. ASSESSMENT

The per capita value of equalized assessment and the proportion of non-residential, non-farm property are good indicators of a municipality's capability to finance local services.[1]

Data Summary 2 shows that in relation to the comparison municipality averages Sherwood Park has a low level of equalized assessment and a very low percentage of non-residential, non-farm property. The opposite is true for rural Strathcona.

When combined for the total county, the data show Strathcona at a per capita equalized assessment level lying between the cities and rural municipalities average. The percentage of non-residential, non-farm property falls to an amount which is the same as the 5RM average.

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1 Equalized assessment values are calculated annually by Alberta Municipal Affairs to bring all property assessment in the province to a common and comparable denominator.

DATA SUMMARY 2 - ASSESSMENT DATA

	Equalized Assessment Per Capita 1982	Per Cent Non-Residential, Non-Farm Property[1]
4C Average	6,465	28
Sherwood Park	5,550	12
5RM Average	14,093	43
Rural Strathcona	17,870	63
Strathcona County	10,220	43

1 1981 data for 4C and 5RM; 1982 data for Strathcona.

Source: See pages 18 and 19 of Main Report.

3. GENERAL OPERATING EXPENDITURES AND REVENUE

Data Summary 3 page S-10 shows that the percentages of general operating expenditure represented by the major service categories in Strathcona County lies between those for the 4C and 5RM averages. Since the county is a rural jurisdiction but includes an urban centre of nearly 30,000, the figures are what one might reasonably expect. The only deviation from this general pattern is for recreation for which the percentage for Strathcona is higher than both of the comparison averages.

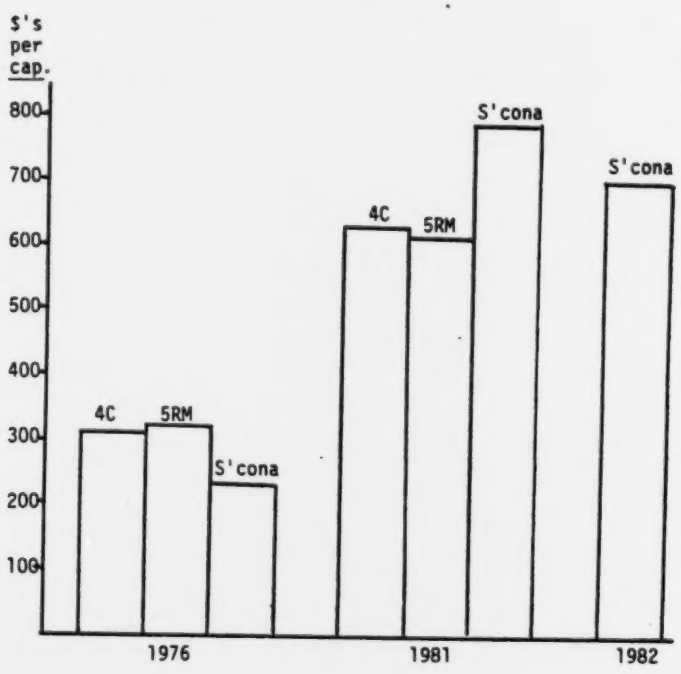
In terms of the total per capita operating expenditure note that there is very little difference between the 4C and 5RM averages.

DATA SUMMARY 3 - GENERAL OPERATING EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES[1]

A. PER CENT OF GENERAL OPERATING EXPENDITURE BY MAJOR SERVICE CATEGORIES 1981

	General Government	Protection	Transportation	Recreation	Debt and Transfers	Others
4C Average	12.0	18.1	17.0	11.9	32.0	9.1
5RM Average	9.6	3.1	56.8	2.8	22.1	5.7
Strathcona	10.8	7.2	35.3	13.2	27.0	6.5

B. TOTAL GENERAL OPERATING EXPENDITURES DOLLARS PER CAPITA 1976 AND 1981



C. AVERAGE ANNUAL INCREASE IN PER CAPITA EXPENDITURE 1976-81

4C	14.6%
5RM	14.7%
Strathcona	
1976-81	27.6%
1976-82	20.0%

D. PER CENT OF GENERAL OPERATING REVENUE BY MAJOR REVENUE CATEGORIES 1981

	Property Taxes	Other Taxes	Sales of Goods & Services	Other Own Revenues	Grants	Internal Transfers
4C Average	41.1	3.4	10.5	20.2	14.1	10.9
5RM Average	54.3	1.3	3.9	20.8	19.1	0.7
Strathcona	47.3	0.04	14.0	15.8	8.4	14.4

1 excludes public transit, water and other utility operations.

Sources: See pages 21, 23, 46 and 52 of Main Report.

Note also that in 1976 Strathcona was noticeably lower than the comparison averages while the reverse is true in 1981. In 1982 the per capita level for the county drops considerably from 1981 indicating that the administrative and fiscal reforms implemented in response to annexation and the economic slowdown appear to have had a restraining effect on overall expenditures.

The average annual increase in per capita expenditures from 1976 to 1981 shows Strathcona exhibited a much higher rate than the city and rural averages. The rate drops somewhat if the 1976 to 1982 period is considered, but nevertheless it is apparent that relatively rapid expenditure increases were occuring in the county in the late 1970's period.

In regard to the percentage of operating revenues, Strathcona departs from the comparison averages in almost all the main categories. Internal transfers and sales of goods and services revenue are more important in the county, while other taxes (such as business taxes and local improvement charges), other own source revenues and grants are less important. The percentage of revenue derived from property taxation lies between the 4C and 5RM averages.

Note that the data presented excludes revenues and expenditures associated with public transit, water, land development and other utility-type of operations.

4. DEBT LEVELS AND SCHOOL AND MUNICIPAL TAXATION

The level of per capita debt in Strathcona is somewhat higher than the average shown for the three comparison rural municipalities. The level of utility debt is similar to the 4C average but, due to a much lower general operations debt, the total debt level in Strathcona is less than half the 4C average.

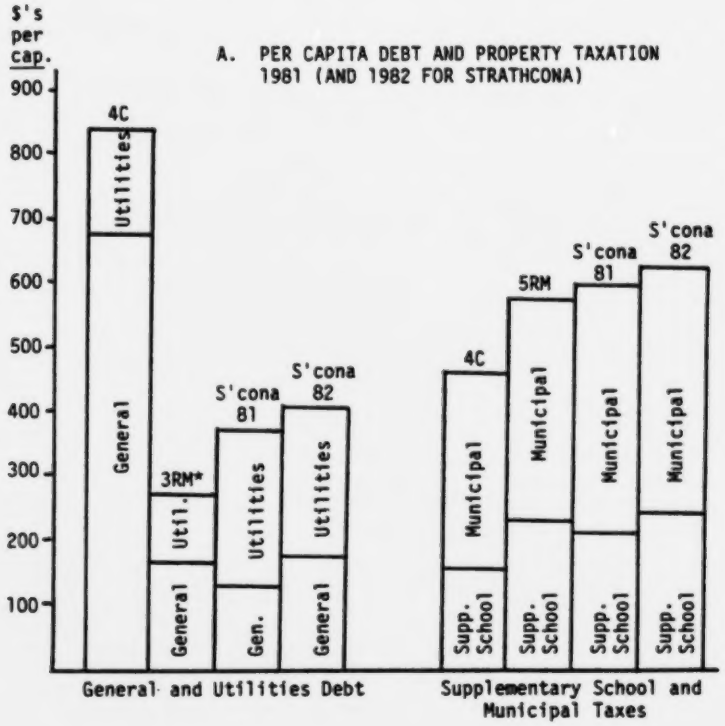
Data Summary 4 page S- also shows the per capita level of property taxation for school and supplementary purposes. The level for Strathcona is quite similar to the rural average but some 30 per cent higher than the city average.

Note, however, that because of the higher levels of assessment in the rural municipalities and in Strathcona than in the cities the 'fiscal effort' (that is, taxes per $1000 equalized assessment) is significantly less in the 5RM and in Strathcona than in the cities. Strathcona's fiscal effort is somewhat higher than the other rurals due to its lower overall level of assessment (see part C of Data Summary 4 and see Data Summary 2).

The level of taxation on the sample residential property shows that Strathcona's municipal taxes are higher than both comparison averages. Total municipal and supplementary school taxes are slightly lower in the county than the 5RM average but are about 10 per cent higher than the 4C average.

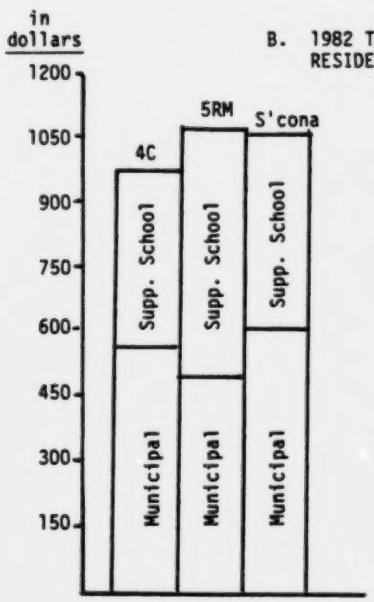
DATA SUMMARY 4 - DEBT AND TAXATION LEVELS

A. PER CAPITA DEBT AND PROPERTY TAXATION 1981 (AND 1982 FOR STRATHCONA)



* 2 rural municipalities of the sample have no long-term debt.

B. 1982 TAXES ON SAMPLE RESIDENTIAL PROPERTIES[1]



C. MUNICIPAL AND SCHOOL TAXES PER $1000 EQUALIZED ASSESSMENT 1981

4C Average	$77	
5RM Average	$52	
Strathcona	$59	1981
	$61	1982

Sources: See pages 27 to 36 of Main Report.

1 Sample property is a standard single-family bungalow of approx. 1200 sq. ft. for cities and Sherwood Park. For rurals and rural Strathcona it is a standard 1200 sq. ft. bungalow on a 3-acre parcel. Note that taxes are the same in Sherwood Park as in rural Strathcona.

PART III - RECENT MUNICIPAL SERVICE TRENDS

This report has focussed on the periods 1976 to 1981 and 1981/82. The late 1970's period was one of rapid economic and population growth in Alberta but that ended abruptly in 1981. Now, in the early 1980's, municipalities are being confronted with the general problems of financial restraint and retrenchment in response to the sudden economic slowdown. Strathcona County has also had to cope with the loss of area, population and assessment as a result of the 1 January 1982 annexation decision.

1. THE 1976 TO 1981 PERIOD

The Main Report reviews the trends in operating expenditures and revenues and levels of taxation from 1976 to 1981. In comparison with the four cities (4C) and five rural municipalities (5RM) averages, Strathcona County shows the following:

- a high percentage increase in total operating expenditures;
- a fiscal effort (measured as expenditure per $1000 equalized assessment) for 1981 which is less than the 4C but greater than the 5RM;
- a percentage of total expenditure for all major services except recreation which lies between the 4C and 5RM averages;
- a percentage of expenditure on recreation which is higher than the other municipal averages;
- large increases from 1976 to 1981 in expenditures on general government, transportation, waste and sewage and recreation;
- a fiscal effort by major services which is generally higher than the 5RM but less than 4C (consistent with assessment levels noted in Part II of this report);

- a percentage of operating revenues by major categories which is considerably different than either the 4C or 5RM averages, especially in regard to 'sales of goods and services' and 'transfers to own funds' which are more important, and in regard to 'grants' which are less important;

- a higher than average municipal tax level, but a tax level for supplementary school requisitions which is near the sample averages;

- a higher than average increase from 1976 to 1981 in taxation levels, especially in taxes generated from residential properties; and

- a large increase in water utility operating expenditures.

In brief, the data indicate a municipal operation which is considerably different than the sample averages and which has shown a relatively high expenditure increase from 1976 to 1981, financed by increases in revenues from property taxation and sales of goods and services.

Much of the expenditure increase is attributable to a major expansion in scope and magnitude of the municipal activities of the county during the late 1970's.

Completely new services were added (public transit, library); others were significantly expanded (especially the construction of new recreation and parks facilities); the capacity of others was increased (water and sewage); and substantial new county offices in Sherwood Park were occupied. In general, the services had to be broadened to meet the relatively expensive demands associated with the rapidly-growing country residential population.

Most of the population growth in the county during the late 1970's occured in the rural areas. During that time, Sherwood Park was reaching its designed capacity, meaning that economies of scale were

realized in many services.

The rural residential growth, on the other hand, necessitated major expenditures. This was especially so for transportation services because of the growing demand for new collector roads, for increased capacity on the major arterials and for increased maintenance (to a costly, oiled standard). Upward pressure was also placed on the expenditures for recreation, garbage collection, fire, ambulance, bylaw enforcement and agricultural services. And, unlike the situation in Sherwood Park, there were limited opportunities to take advantage of economies of scale because of the dispersed nature of the rural residential subdivisions.

These factors largely explain the large increase in per capita operating expenditures from 1976 to 1981. As well, the comparatively high standards of the services provided, especially in the rural context, resulted in Strathcona having significantly higher 1981 per capita expenditure levels than other metropolitan-area rural municipalities.

The overall effect was to accentuate the differences between Strathcona and other rural municipalities and to accelerate the county's transition from a basically rural municipality to, at the least, a 'semi-urban' municipality in which service levels and expectations are related more to an urban than rural environment.

2. THE 1981/82 PERIOD

The trends from the late 1970's eventually entailed a major administrative re-organization in the early 1980's. Those reforms were prompted also by the realization that a significant portion of the county,

including part of its vital industrial tax base, would be annexed by the City of Edmonton.

In some respects, the threat of annexation was of some advantage since it forced the county to evolve and implement a series of administrative and fiscal measures which better prepared it, at an earlier date, to meet the challenges imposed by the general economic recession. The rationalization of the provision of municipal services enabled the county to reduce significantly its overall expenditures from 1981 to 1982 while maintaining, for the most part, relatively high service standards.

The annexation which took effect in 1982 affected the demographic structure of the county. The population which was lost included many farmers (on much of the best agricultural land of the county), a large group of trailer court residents and some country-residential residents. As a consequence, Sherwood Park came to loom even larger in the overall county structure, while in the rural area the traditional farming population became even more dwarfed by the country-residential dwellers. Thus, while the annexation did not alter the underlying demographic trends, it did serve to accelerate them.

The political balance of the county also was influenced by the annexation. The long-term trend had been one of increasing representation of the urban interests of Sherwood Park (although the representation has always lagged behind what might be expected in terms of population distribution). This trend was accelerated by the loss of one rural electoral division through annexation, leaving the current county council comprised of four urban and four rural representatives.

The full impact of the annexation and the reforms implemented by the county cannot be assessed accurately from the review of the 1981 to 1982 period. In general terms, however, the reduction in overall expenditure levels, the increased reliance upon 'sales of goods and services' revenue and the re-evaluation of appropriate service standards are notable features. The underlying policy of expenditure restraint is likely to continue at least until the impact of the annexation losses (and the annual decreases in compensating provincial grants) are fully absorbed.

PART IV - SERVICE RANGE AND METHOD OF PROVISION

1. SERVICE RANGE

The range of municipal services available to residents of Strathcona is broadly in line with that provided in other large municipalities. This is especially the case for Sherwood Park in comparison with medium-size cities in Alberta. However, the rural population in Strathcona appears to be exceptionally served in a few specific respects.

The residents of Sherwood Park receive a fairly standard range of services, much as might be experienced in any other large urban centre in the province. Nothing exceptional may be identified, although there are certain functions, discharged elsewhere, which are absent in the County of Strathcona.

Certain municipalities are engaged in the provision of gas, electricity or telephone utility services to their residents, although these municipalities are the exception rather than the rule. The absence of these municipal activities in the Strathcona context constitutes nothing out of the ordinary, but signifies instead the general adequacy of existing means of provision.

Several of the sample urban municipalities indicate activity in the areas of public housing and in the subdivision and development of land. In Strathcona the nature of the Sherwood Park community ensures that there is little need for the municipal provision of public housing. Also, to date, competition between several private developers has been sufficient to ensure an adequate supply of reasonably priced and suitably

subdivided land. The county has not therefore had to become active in this area.

Rural municipalities tend to engage in a narrower range of services than urban municipalities. The County of Strathcona is unusual in that as an officially classified 'rural' municipality, it provides a comparatively wide and full range of services, including ambulance, fire protection, regional recreation facilities, bylaw enforcement officers, rural bookmobile service, preventive social services, and garbage collection services to the majority of the country-residential population.

Such services are not normally provided directly by rural municipalities and their availability in rural Strathcona can be attributed largely to the 'urban-lifestyle' of the extensive country-residential population and to the presence of Sherwood Park within the county. Rural residents of Strathcona can be considered exceptionally well provided with municipal services in comparison with residents of other rural municipalities.

2. METHOD OF SERVICE PROVISION

Most of the services to Sherwood Park residents are provided in a similar manner to that found in other large urban centres. This involves a mix of direct municipal delivery, selective contracting, and arrangements with other governments.

A comparatively significant proportion of expenditures is for 'contracted and general services.' Some of these expenditures involve private commercial operators, but others involve other governments, most

notably the City of Edmonton.

The City supplies Strathcona with treated water, sewage treatment and garbage disposal facilities and transit-related services. In the past, the county has benefitted from the relatively low levels of charge stemming from the economies of scale associated with most of these services. But the county has no control over the setting of the rates charged, and lately these have been characterised by sharp increases at frequent intervals, complicating the budget process. As well, the availability of city services and facilities cannot always be counted upon in the future, and some uncertainty is therefore introduced into the county's planning processes.

Apart from the arrangements with the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission and the Northeast Water Board, regional service agreements in Strathcona are not nearly as significant as in most other rural jurisdictions. Many rural municipalities have comprehensive inter-municipal agreements with near-by centres for services such as recreation, libraries, fire protection and ambulance. In Strathcona, these services are provided directly by the county itself, although some services, most notably ambulance and fire protection, involve mutual back-up support agreements with adjacent jurisdictions. In a sense however, Strathcona itself may be viewed as a very comprehensive and thoroughly integrated regional service delivery mechanism encompassing the urban centre of Sherwood Park and the surrounding rural areas of the county.

Finally, there are two other unusual aspects in Strathcona relating to the method of service provision. The distribution of water

to Sherwood Park is through a franchise granted by the county to TransAlta Utilities (but this arrangement will end in December 1985 when the county will take over the service). Also, recreation services in Strathcona illustrate, within a single jurisdiction, both of the two main approaches to this service; that is, the direct, staff-intensive approach found in Sherwood Park, and the indirect approach, with its much greater reliance on volunteers and community groups, found in rural Strathcona.

Overall, the method of service provision in Strathcona features a paradoxical mixture of dependence and autonomy. In relation to a few key urban services the county is dependent to an unusual degree on another municipality (Edmonton), while much of the rural servicing involves an unusual measure of autonomy and the acknowledgement of a high level of self-responsibility.

3. CONTRACTED SERVICES AND STAFFING LEVELS

The provision of municipal services is often contracted out by municipalities to private enterprises. The garbage collection service is one example in the County of Strathcona. Another contracted service is police protection in Sherwood Park which is undertaken by the RCMP. As well, certain road maintenance chores are contracted to private operations.

The percentage of total operating expenditures represented by 'contracted and general services' and 'purchases from other governments' in Strathcona County (around 30 per cent) is about normal in comparison with the sample cities and rural municipalities.

In regard to staffing levels, three features are notable. First, the proportion of total staff represented by part-time employees in Strathcona (about 30 per cent) is very similar to most of the comparison municipalities.

Second, the number of full-time staff per 1000 population and the number of total staff per 1000 population in Strathcona County lies between the city and rural averages especially in 1981. For 1982 staff increases in Strathcona and the loss of population due to annexation pushes the total staff ratio to a level very similar to the cities average.

Third, the expenditure on 'salaries, wages and benefits' divided by the total employees shows Strathcona to be virtually identical to both the city and rural averages.

PART V - SERVICE RATINGS

As described in Part I section 2 of this Summary Report (see page S-2), each of the municipal services provided in the County of Strathcona are rated on the basis of level, cost, public satisfaction, cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness.[1]

The ratings are based on a seven-point scale: very high, high, above average, average, below average, low, very low. The basis for the ratings are the comparative data, especially that from the four cities (4C) and five rural municipalities (5RM). Ratings are made for Sherwood Park, for the rural area of the county and for the county as a whole.

The services analysed include the following:

- Legislative service (that is, the county council)
- General Administration
- Police Protection (RCMP for Sherwood Park are paid for by the county; RCMP for the rural areas is a provincial responsibility)
- Fire Protection
- Ambulance
- Bylaw Enforcement
- Transportation (that is, primarily road maintenance)
- Public Transit
- Garbage Collection and Disposal
- Water Service (including main service to Sherwood Park, and the small systems for Josephburg and Ardrossan)

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1 The one exception is planning services which are presently undergoing a major change and which, in 1981 and 1982, were accounted as part of general administration. Also, there were no public opinion data available for ambulance, bylaw enforcement and agricultural services; therefore, for those services no public satisfaction or cost-effectiveness ratings were possible.

- Sanitary Sewage Service (as for water service)
- Family and Community Services (FCS)
- Agricultural Service Board Services (ASB)
- Recreation
- Library

The individual service analyses comprise most of Part III of the Main Report. Each service analysis is like a minor report in itself. Those service analyses should be consulted for further detail. The information presented here is a brief overview only.

1. SERVICE LEVEL

Of the services rated in terms of the entire county, only one - ambulance - is rated as lower than comparable averages in terms of level of service. This low rating is due to the inadequate training of the ambulance personnel, a deficiency which the county intends to rectify during 1983.

High service level ratings are given for transportation, recreation and library services with above average ratings for police and fire protection, garbage collection and disposal and family and community services (FCS).

The county pattern regarding service level is essentially repeated in the Sherwood Park context, although public transit as well as ambulance is rated less than average. The public transit service is presently the subject of a special study to investigate the feasibility of the county operating its own system rather than relying so much on

the City of Edmonton.

For the rural areas of the county, service level ratings are in several cases a notch higher than those for Sherwood Park or the county as a whole; for instance, transportation, garbage collection, general administration, recreation and library. This feature relates to the comparative base for the rural areas which is other rural municipalities in which the normal or average service level is much lower than that provided in Strathcona County. The only services rated below average are ambulance and the water service for the hamlets of Josephburg and Ardrossan (although other rural areas receiving water services by 'tapping-in' to main distribution lines would receive a very high rating on service level).

In general terms, the overall municipal service level provided by the county is better than that provided in most comparison municipalities, especially in regard to the services available in the rural component of the county.

2. SERVICE COST

For the entire county, service cost ratings cluster around the average with no services rated as high cost and with only the recreation cost to taxpayers rated as low.

Above average costs are noted for fire protection, garbage services, FCS and libraries, but all of those services have above average or higher service level ratings. Below average cost ratings are given for the legislative services, police protection and ambulance, and it is only for the ambulance service where the below average costs relate

to a below average service level.

For Sherwood Park, more of the services are rated as having below average costs with some - such as police protection, fire protection, transportation and taxpayer costs for public transit and recreation - receiving low or very low ratings. These ratings generally pertain to the fact that the net costs of services are financed through taxation throughout the entire county which provides a much larger assessment base than that normally available for urban centres. Above average costs are noted for public transit users and for the above average services of FCS and library. The only high cost rating is for the sewage service due to the level of user charges imposed.

In the rural area, several services receive a high cost rating, including police and fire protection, transportation, garbage and recreation services. With the exception of police protection (for which rural residents pay for the Sherwood Park service), the high cost ratings are for services with high or very high service level ratings. Lower than average costs are present for the legislative service, the water user charges for Josephburg and Ardrossan, and for agricultural services.

In overall terms, the service cost ratings only partially reflect the rather high service level ratings. In the individual service analysis sections, it has been mentioned that for services such as general government, transportation, and recreation the integrated rural/urban structure of the county enables some cost savings, especially in terms of administration and staffing, thereby enabling above average service levels to be provided at below average or average cost levels.

3. SERVICE SATISFACTION

The results of the 1979 Burton survey (at times supplemented by other sources) indicate good levels of public satisfaction for the county as a whole, with average to high ratings for all service categories.

The ratings for Sherwood Park on its own are even more favourable especially for police and fire protection, and garbage and water services.

The rural area ratings, on the other hand, are in several cases lower than that for Sherwood Park or for the entire county. This is particularly noticeable for transportation where a below average satisfaction rating occurs for the service which is rated as having a very high service level. The only service more highly rated in terms of satisfaction in the rural areas than in Sherwood Park is the legislative service. This likely reflects the county council distribution at that time which was five rural representatives to four from Sherwood Park.

Throughout the analysis of the Burton survey data it was often noted that the lowest levels of satisfaction were expressed by the country-residential residents. This feature may be attributable to those residents drawing comparisons with urban centre services rather than with what would be normal in a rural setting. The traditional rural residents usually expressed much higher satisfaction than those on acreages or in country-residential subdivisions.

4. SERVICE COST-EFFICIENCY

The service level and cost ratings have been combined to arrive at the rough ratings of service cost-efficiency.

For the entire county, the majority of services receive above average ratings on cost-efficiency with the legislative service and recreation in particular being highly rated. Low cost-efficiency is noted for the ambulance service because a major improvement in the service, through staff training, could be achieved at a very reasonable cost. Bylaw enforcement receives a below average rating because a comparatively small amount of the service expenditure is paid through user charges or licence and fees revenues.

The efficiency ratings for services in Sherwood Park are generally higher than those for the remainder of the county, most notably for police and fire protection, transportation, public transit (taxpayers) and recreation. However, additional ratings below average, aside from those for ambulance and bylaw enforcement, occur for public transit users and the sanitary sewage service. Those service efficiency ratings reflect the relatively high user charges which are levied.

In the rural parts of the county, the most noticeable differences from the Sherwood Park ratings are for police protection, where the low rating reflects the rural taxpayers' burden for Sherwood Park services, and for transportation and fire protection where the average ratings reflect the high cost of the high service levels provided. As well, the legislative service is rated as more cost-efficient than in Sherwood Park while the agricultural services are rated above average.

5. SERVICE COST-EFFECTIVENESS

The service cost and satisfaction ratings have been combined to arrive at a measure of cost-effectiveness.

For the county as a whole, most services are rated as above average with recreation, police protection and legislative services receiving high or very high ratings. A few services are rated as 'only' average but these include the major expenditure areas of transportation and general administration.

In the context of Sherwood Park, the vast majority of the services register levels of cost-effectiveness which are above average or, more impressively, high or very high. A notable exception is public transit (users) which is rated below average, and FCS and general administration which are rated as average.

A more mixed picture exists for the rural areas with average ratings predominant. The most notable variations from the Sherwood Park ratings are the average, rather than very high, ratings for police protection and garbage services, and the low, rather than high, rating for transportation - the single most costly service especially in the rural parts of the county.

6. COST-EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS DISCUSSION

Considered overall, there are very few services in Strathcona County which consistently registered below average levels of cost-efficiency or cost-effectiveness. The ratings presented, however, and the variations

in the ratings between the urban and rural areas indicate room for some specific improvements.

In terms of services to the entire county, candidates for attention in regard to cost-efficiency are ambulance and bylaw enforcement. Service level improvements are recognized for ambulance, while the net cost for bylaw enforcement (while small in terms of the total services) might be reduced somewhat through user charge and other non-tax revenue.[1]

General administration and FCS receive average ratings but in relation to other services evaluated those ratings may be deemed as 'only average' and perhaps inadequate given the county's overall high standard of performance.

The assessment of general administration in this report must be considered rather cursory in comparison with what might be achieved by a specialized management study, and it is recognized that recent administrative reforms are not fully reflected in the data used. Nevertheless, considering that the service accounts for in excess of 20 per cent of total discounted net expenditures (1982) and involves significant debt repayment expenses as well, even minor improvements in cost-efficiency could be significant.

For family and community services, the rather high level of the service is recognized but cost reductions could arise from efforts to encourage greater participation by local community organizations.

In terms of the services specific to Sherwood Park, public transit warrants (and is currently receiving) some attention related to service

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1 However, the argument for encouraging compliance with bylaws rather than penalization for infractions is recognized.

improvements. The cost of certain improvements may be more than offset by increased ridership, perhaps enabling the county to minimize transit fare increases and improve service satisfaction levels.

The sanitary sewage service has relatively poor cost-efficiency ratings because of the comparatively high rate of user charges now in effect. It could be that rate increases are overdue in some of the comparison municipalities and it is recognized that the quality of sewage treatment (at City of Edmonton) facilities is above comparable standards. Nevertheless, efforts to minimize future user charge increases for the sewage service could improve its cost-efficiency (although the cost associated with Edmonton treatment facilities is out of the county's hands).

The ratings in the rural areas for many services are slightly below that for Sherwood Park. For some services, such as fire protection, the ratings are a consequence of high costs involved for a high level of service. Cost-cutting measures would likely entail a lower service level and that is undesirable. The recent efforts by the county to expand its mutual aid agreements with adjacent municipalities appears to be the sensible route for providing the service, especially to rural fringe areas, without drastically escalating costs. Service satisfaction by rural residents might be expected to improve.

High costs for a high service level in rural areas are also associated with transportation services. Specifically in regard to rural road maintenance, the recent policy of reducing the unusually large mileage of 'oiled' roads should lead to significant cost reductions. It might be expected that the already relatively low satisfaction ratings from

rural residents would decline reducing even further the rating for cost-effectiveness. But if the alternative of significant tax increases, and the comparatively high standard of rural road maintenance were explained, public understanding, especially from country-residential residents, might improve.

The garbage service is a prime candidate for service rationalization especially in the rural areas. The cost-efficiency, although rated as above average, could be improved by a more economic operation of the county's disposal facilities at Ardrossan and Josephburg (where per tonnage costs are far above the norms). Also, the cost-efficiency and effectiveness ratings discussed are those which relate to rural areas in the county that receive a collection service. Other rural areas do not. It is suggested that the implementation of user charges be examined to remove the service as a burden on general taxation and to eliminate inequitable cost burdens.

The water service at Josephburg and Ardrossan warrants service level improvements. These improvements, however, should only be those for which the hamlet residents are willing to pay for through user charges. The water and sewage service provided should be paid for, as in Sherwood Park, by users and not through general taxation (although some small level of general tax subsidy might be warranted in recognition of the lack of economies of scale in small urban concentrations).

There is little that can be done to improve the low rating of cost-efficiency for police services in the rural areas. The Sherwood Park service requires support from general taxation and all county tax-payers, whether in Sherwood Park or not, are liable to the same taxation.

There is no potential for alternative revenue sources to reduce the evident cost burden inequity.

Notwithstanding the above qualifications, the County of Strathcona is clearly a highly successful municipal operation on the strictly economic grounds of cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Both the urban and rural components of the county are very well-served, the rural areas particularly so in comparison with what is normal in rural municipalities.

A large part of the evident success of the county must be attributed to its unique structure (for Alberta), integrating rural and urban concerns in one municipal administration. The economies of scale and general system efficiencies inherent in the integrated arrangement have helped to enable a rather high level of service at a reasonable (although by no means low) level of residential taxation.

Some of the success must also be attributed to the legacy of a relatively strong non-residential assessment base. Recently, however, that tax base has been eroded by annexation and due to the general economic slowdown it is growing at a much slower rate than before. Therefore, improvements in service cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness are perhaps more important now and in the immediate future than in the recent past.

PART VI - SERVICE COST DISTRIBUTION

1. PERCENTAGE OF TAX BILL BY SERVICE CATEGORIES

Data Summary 5 page S- shows the relative importance of the main expenditure categories in Strathcona County for 1982. Note that transportation services represent the single most important category by far, accounting for one-third of municipal expenditures. The 'fiscal service' categories of debt charges and transfers to own reserves and other funds account for almost 30 per cent of the total, while general government, police and fire protection and recreation and library services account for all but 7 per cent of the remainder.

2. RURAL/URBAN COST DISTRIBUTION

The net cost of each service (including associated debt charges) have been allocated to Sherwood Park, the industrial area and the rural area of the county.[1] The overall results are summarized in Part B of Data Summary 5.

It is evident that the industrial area generates much more in tax revenue than in servicing costs (over 30 per cent of county taxes but only 6 per cent of net costs). This general pattern of industrial development subsidizing the cost of services is quite normal for most municipal operations.

Both Sherwood Park and the rural areas receive significant benefit from the industrial area taxes but notice that the benefit (as

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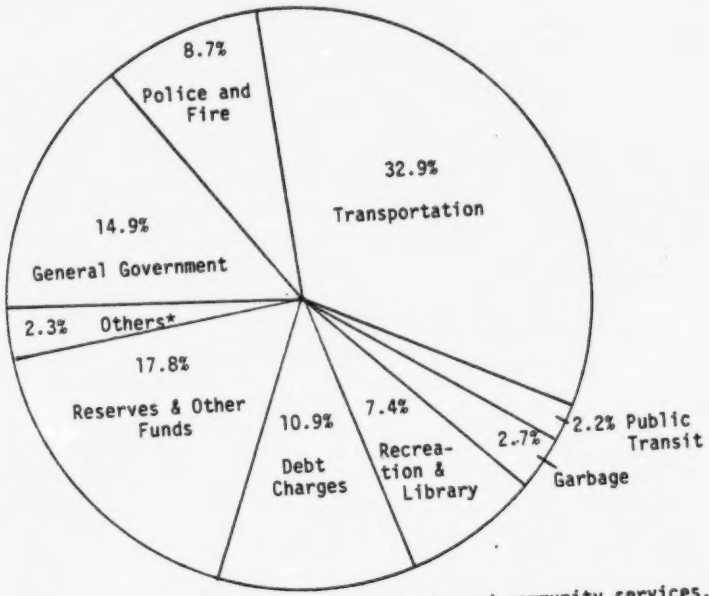
1 See page 380 of Main Report for summary of cost allocations.

DATA SUMMARY 5 - SERVICE COST DISTRIBUTION

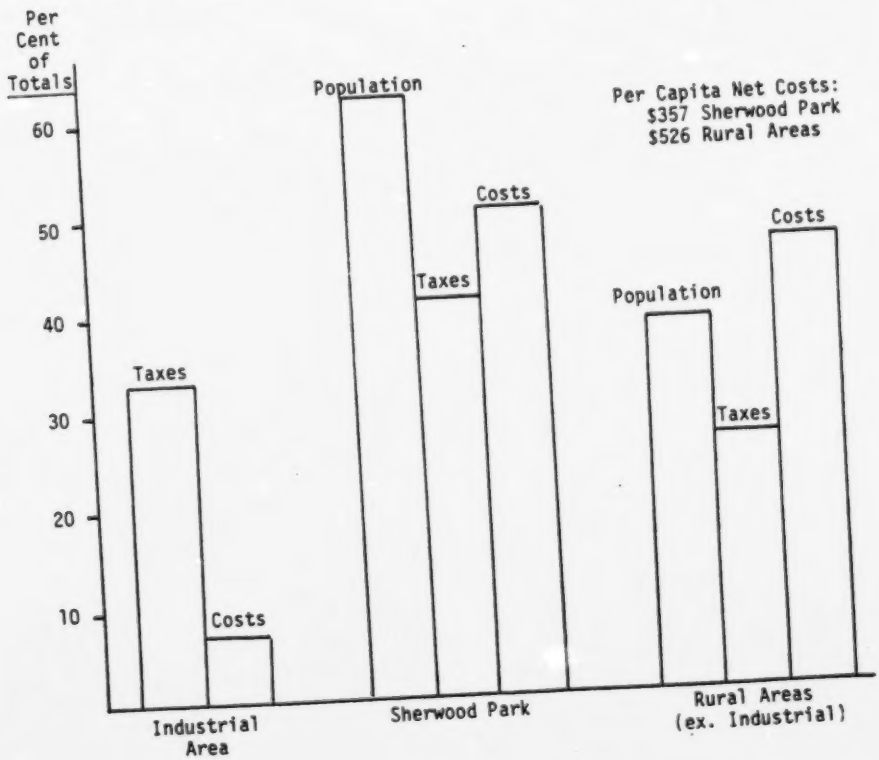
A. STRATHCONA COUNTY, PER CENT OF MUNICIPAL NET EXPENDITURES BY MAIN SERVICE CATEGORIES, 1982



* includes ambulance, bylaw enforcement, family and community services, agricultural services.

Sources: See page 340 and 382 of Main Report.

B. STRATHCONA COUNTY; POPULATION, TAXES AND COSTS GENERATED IN PERCENTAGES BY INDUSTRIAL, URBAN AND RURAL AREAS



illustrated by the difference between percentage of taxes and percentage of net costs) is much greater for the rural areas. The per capita net cost for the rural area is almost 50 per cent higher than that for Sherwood Park, reflecting the high level and high cost of rural services discussed in the previous section.

The overall result is that Sherwood Park with 62 per cent of the county population accounts for less than 50 per cent of net costs while the rural area with 38 per cent of the population accounts for 45 per cent of net costs.

In terms of individual services, the findings of the Main Report indicate that costs are more or less equitably distributed between the urban and rural components for ambulance, garbage services, library, recreation and family and community services.[1]

Sherwood Park receives a cost benefit for the services of police and fire protection, public transit and water. (That is, the costs generated by those services in Sherwood Park are, in effect, subsidized by the tax revenue from rural residents.)

The police service benefit is due to the fact that the rural areas are served by RCMP which are paid for by the provincial government, while Sherwood Park is served by RCMP which are primarily paid for by the municipality, that is, the entire county.

The fire service benefit is attributable to full-time fire-fighters based in Sherwood Park while the rural detachments are manned by much less-costly volunteers.

The public transit service is essentially intended primarily

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1 Although rural residents not receiving a garbage collection service have an inequitable tax burden for that particular service.

for urban residents. It should be noted, however, that the rural area receives a major benefit in terms of school busing transportation with Sherwood Park accounting for only about 12 per cent of that school service cost (see page 179 of Main Report).

The water service benefit pertains entirely to the associated debt charges most of which are a charge on general taxation. The actual operation of the water service in Sherwood Park in fact generates a surplus from user charges.

The services for which the rural areas receive a cost benefit include bylaw enforcement, ASB services and transportation.

Bylaw enforcement and agricultural services combined account for less than one per cent of total net expenditures, but transportation alone represents over 30 per cent. This is the service in which the rural area residents clearly receive a major cost benefit, primarily due to the high cost of maintaining rural roads at a comparatively high standard.

3. COST DISTRIBUTION DISCUSSION

While the rural residential taxpayer may seem to be getting an especially good deal out of the current situation (accounting for a 50 per cent higher per capita level of costs but paying taxes on the basis of a standard county-wide mill rate) these circumstances may not continue. And though the existing integrated urban/rural structure may appear to be unfavourable to urban taxpayers they will increasingly be in need of this structure to share the rising proportion of net costs which they can be expected to generate in the near future.

It is important to appreciate that the current relatively low per capita net costs in Sherwood Park are in large part a consequence of the relative newness of the community, and of the recent full realization of several economies of scale. Yet Sherwood Park is in the process of crossing a key threshold. It was initially designed with a population of around 30,000 in mind, and this level has now been reached. The expansion (to more than double the present population by the early decades of the next century) which is now being initiated will involve considerable front-end costs and, until anticipated levels of future development materialize, little in the way of economies of scale will be realized.

In addition there will be costs associated with the ageing of the existing Sherwood Park community. Whereas much of the present infrastructure was installed by developers with little or no municipal costs, this infrastructure will begin to deteriorate in the coming years, requiring extensive repair and replacement work and involving significant municipal costs.

A further factor working in Sherwood Park's favour in recent years is the fact that its population growth slowed considerably in the late 1970's, after massive growth in the early part of that decade. By 1981/82 the county had come to terms with the high costs of coping with such rapid urban growth, and was enjoying the greater manageability of much more settled conditions.

However the county still had a costly rapid-growth situation to cope with in the rural area. The rural population registered larger increases not only in the first part of the 1970's but especially in the

late 1970's. This particular form of growth could not be planned for in such an effective manner as was possible in Sherwood Park, and as a result each new residential unit tended to constitute a significant marginal cost increment. In the Sherwood Park context by contrast the same unit would have been more important for its contribution to economies of scale.

At present there are in the order of 2700 approved but undeveloped country residential lots available. There is therefore considerable scope for the recent high rate of rural growth to continue. Depending on the location of lots, and whether advantage can be taken of already existing infrastructure, the associated new population could contribute to a greater realization of economies of scale in the rural context. However, the additional costs consequent upon too rapid growth could also cancel out this factor. Nevertheless it seems likely that the rural area will at least be characterized by a lower rate of increase in the costs which it generates.

Overall the probable trend in the short to medium term will be one of a fairly rapid convergence in the level of per capita net costs generated by the urban and rural parts of the County. By contrast the period studied here appears to have been characterized by maximum divergence.

PART VII - MUNICIPAL SERVICES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENTS IN STRATHCONA COUNTY

The significant factor which greatly affects the level and type of services in Strathcona compared to other Alberta municipalities is that Sherwood Park, with an urban population of about 30,000, has not been incorporated as an urban municipality. It remains a hamlet and as such it is part of a rural municipality. In all other parts of Alberta, incorporated urban centres are governed by councils elected by an urban population, and incorporated rural areas are governed by councils elected by a rural population. Strathcona County is unique (in the Alberta context) of being governed by a council which represents both urban and rural residents.

1. ADVANTAGES

The most significant advantage of the present local government arrangement is that, according to the needs of each, the urban and rural areas can share the tax revenues derived from the considerable assessment of the industrial area of the county. This has permitted a relatively high level of services, particularly in the rural areas, at a reasonable level of residential taxation.

A second advantage is that services can be provided to both the urban and rural areas through decisions of a single municipal council. In most other rural municipalities in Alberta, services such as fire protection, ambulance, recreation and libraries are provided through inter-municipal agreements with near-by urban municipalities. These regional

type of service arrangements, while often the most economical and sensible means of provision, are dependent upon agreements and periodic renewals of agreements among two or more separate municipalities. The integrated structure of Strathcona County enables it to provide these 'regional' type of services on its own.

A third advantage is that the integrated service provision enables a realization of significant economies in scale and in avoidance of duplication. Significant cost savings have been identified in this report which are directly attributable to the fact that urban and rural areas are serviced by one administration.

The economies realized through the local government arrangement could be used to lower taxes or to increase the level of service. In general, this study indicates that Strathcona has used the 'savings' to provide a higher level and broader range of services than is common in other rural municipalities. The presence of Sherwood Park has resulted in the county endeavouring to provide a high - almost urban - level of services to its rural residents to ensure that both components of the county are well served.

The extent of the advantages of the present municipal arrangement may be assessed, in part, by the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of county residents. Various public opinion polls conducted in the county, including the 1979 poll used in this report, have indicated a rather high level of approval of most individual services and of the county administration in general.

2. DISADVANTAGES

There are two main disadvantages in the present local government structure of the county. One relates to how the county is viewed for purposes of provincial grants and requisitions and service responsibilities, the other to uncertainties about the long-term viability of the county.

In regard to grants, the provincial system of grants to municipalities is geared to standard municipal arrangements with specific grants for specific types of municipalities. Strathcona County is technically a rural municipality, but effectively it is a municipality which includes a city and a densely-populated rural area.

There is no consistency among the various provincial departments which provide municipal grants as to how to treat Sherwood Park and the rural area of the county for the purposes of calculating the grants.

For transportation grants, Sherwood Park is not considered a city and therefore the county receives less money for urban transportation assistance and for the rural road maintenance grant. For family and community services grants, the entire county is considered a city and therefore the county receives less money for FCS.[1]

In regard to requisitions, for purposes of the Provincial Planning Fund, the entire county is considered a rural municipality and the requisition imposed is levied on that basis (0.259 mills on equalized assessment in 1983). In this instance, the process used is an advantage to Strathcona because if Sherwood Park (or the entire county) were treated as an urban centre the mill rate imposed (1983) would be 0.563.

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1 See pages 149 to 153 and 251 to 252 of Main Report.

In regard to service responsibilities, Sherwood Park is considered an urban municipality (of over 1500 residents) and is therefore responsible for paying for police services. (The county does, however, receive the law enforcement grant.) The rural area of the county, as in all rural areas of Alberta, is policed by RCMP paid for by the province. As has been noted earlier (see pages 375 and 383 for example), there is a distinct cost imbalance to rural residents of Strathcona since they are the only rural residents in Alberta which pay, through property taxation, for RCMP services.

It is apparent that the province does not have a consistent policy on how to treat Sherwood Park for municipal purposes. Given the unique nature of the county, it would probably be to the county's overall advantage (and it would make sense) for Sherwood Park to be considered an urban area of equivalent to city status.[1]

A second disadvantage which is partly related to the unique local government arrangement in the county is the uncertainty in regard to future boundaries and assessment base.

Both the City of Edmonton and the Town of Fort Saskatchewan have, in the past few years, annexed large areas of the county. If the annexations removed both assessment and service responsibility in equal amounts they would raise no major financial problem, but the recent Edmonton annexation removed from the county a much larger percentage of assessment than the percentage of population or area removed. As well,

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1 This would require the formation of a specific boundary for Sherwood Park.

the uncertainty of when annexations may occur or at what intervals they may occur raises difficulties in deciding on the logical location of facilities and long term financial planning.

In addition to the uncertainties of annexation by adjoining municipalities, there is the internal matter that at some future time Sherwood Park might wish to consider incorporation as a city. Related to that would be questions regarding boundaries and the assessment base.

3. THE FUTURE

Although the present arrangements have worked well, there are a number of conditions which must be met if the Strathcona system of local government is not to encounter major difficulties.

As indicated in a previous study[1] the first condition is that representation on council must bear a reasonable relationship to the number of urban and rural residents, and municipal decisions must be perceived as being fair and equitable in relation to each. Because the representation of Sherwood Park on the council has increased as the urban population has increased, urban representation on council has not been a major issue to date (although urban representation has been less than the urban share of the total population would indicate). In the years ahead if the urban population increases substantially, the issue of urban representation will emerge unless periodic adjustments to electoral divisions are made.

A second condition relates to the cost and benefits of the

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1 Alberta Municipal Affairs. Hamlet of Sherwood Park. A review of Alternative Forms of Government, 1977.

services provided to the urban and rural areas. There is the possibility of a sense of grievance on the part of either the urban or rural residents that one group is subsidizing the other for services which they do not need or to which they have no ready access.

In the past, taxes for both the urban and rural areas of the county were average or less than average compared to other urban and rural areas. And because a large part of total service costs were borne by non-residential taxation, the precise cost/benefit to urban and rural areas was not an issue of crucial concern.

However, present taxes for the urban and rural areas, in relation to other comparable municipalities, although not the highest, are above average and in the higher ranges.

If the county experienced further loss of industrial assessment or if residential and acreage population increased substantially with no parallel increase in industrial assessment, then the issue of urban/rural cost/benefits might assume added importance and result in wider public debate.

In the Main Report, reference has been made to the use of user charges or fees for certain services to ensure the costs are borne directly by those that benefit from the service. Of course, this is presently the county policy in respect to water and sewage services and, to a large extent, for recreation services. Bylaw enforcement, agricultural services and garbage collection are other services for which user charges have been suggested (although problems in administration and fiscal philiosphies have also been recognized).

However, while user charges may be effective in eliminating benefit/cost inequities for a few services, it should be recognized that the bulk of expenditures, especially for general government, transportation and police and fire protection, must be financed through general taxation. The challenge for the county is to ensure that, while inequities may persist in the financing of specific services such as police protection, the overall municipal operation is such that no residents or particular group of residents are being unfairly treated.

The obvious economies of scale and system efficiencies inherent in the integrated structure of the county have been mentioned in this report. Separate municipal jurisdictions for the urban and rural components may be considered desirable on political grounds or on strict benefit/cost principles; however, the analysis contained in this report leads to the conclusion that such a structure would inevitably result in significantly higher overall costs and would likely lead to comparatively lower service levels. The generally above average performance of the county in terms of cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness would be difficult to maintain.

In the present uncertain economic environment it appears sensible, on economic grounds at least, to capitalise on the advantages of the existing integrated structure which underlie much of the county's success to date. Some of the political disadvantages which accompany such a unique structure in the Alberta context could be overcome through provincial-municipal negotiations. And the rural/urban benefit/cost issue could be handled by a continuing review of the service provisions and financing, including perhaps periodic public opinion polls (such as that done in 1979) to assess particular problems or grievances of county residents.